



An Environment that Positively Impacts Young Children

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Jessica, age four, enters her new preschool classroom for the very first time. She looks around and tries to determine what happens in this space? Does she belong here? Will it be an interesting place to spend her days? Will she be supported as she grows and develops?

Jessica will discover the answers through her interactions with the physical environment of her classroom. If she spends her day in an effectively designed environment, Jessica will be physically, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually nurtured. This appropriate environment can maximize her intellectual potential and provide a foundation for the development of her emotional security.

How Children Understand the Environment
Young children strive to make sense of the world in which they live. They try to organize the visual images and concrete objects in their environment into meaningful systems. Children want to determine how the space works and what activities can happen in this place.

Today's young children are spending a large number of hours in a "new" environment - child care. Some children who begin attending child care in infancy may spend as much as 12,000 hours in this setting. This massive number of hours in one environment demands that the space be carefully designed to create the "best" place possible for young children.

The Caring Teacher is a Critical Component
Specific design techniques, when combined with a caring teacher, can help the environment become a wonderful place for nurturing the development of young children. Children who live in this classroom will have many opportunities for expanding their knowledge by actively participating in a world that is appropriate for their level of development. It will include spaces for active play as well as spaces for privacy. Opportunities are provided for a child to work quietly and areas are available where small groups can collaborate on a project.

An Environment that Matches Young Children
The first step in creating an appropriate environment for infants, toddlers, and preschool children is to examine how young children learn and develop. Each stage of development has unique characteristics that influence how a child will experience his or her environment.

For example, infants and toddlers learn about their world by acting on objects and materials in their environment. As the toddler feels the texture of a beach ball, pushes the air filled object, and rolls it across the carpeted floor, he constructs an understanding of the ball. Because infants and toddlers learn by interacting with the environment, their space must be designed with many opportunities for physically exploring real materials. Varied materials are stored where the child can easily select them. Other items are placed where they are not visible but can be retrieved when a specific activity or individual need occurs.

Preschoolers are active learners who continue to examine materials while beginning to use objects in more complex combinations. They are developing symbolic representation as they take on roles and participate in socio-dramatic play. Their language explodes during this period as they try to find "labels" for the objects and people in their world. Language gives young children the power to question and find answers.

Learning centers are effective ways to organize and support these developing abilities. The center areas clearly communicate to preschoolers what activity occurs in this area and the available materials that will stimulate their play. Traditional centers as well as unique centers encourage language interactions, socio-dramatic play, and the construction of experiences based on their level of understanding. By adding literacy materials including books, paper and writing tools, this construction will include "reading and writing" opportunities.

Brain Development During the Early Years
Early childhood educators and neurologists agree that the first eight years are a critical time of brain development. Infants come into the world with a brain waiting to be woven into the complex fabric of the mind. Some neurons in the brain are wired before birth, but many are waiting to be programmed by early experiences. The early environment where young children live will help determine the direction of their brain development. Children who have severely limited opportunities for appropriate experiences will be delayed; this may permanently affect their learning. But, children who have the opportunity to develop in an organized and appropriate environment are challenged to think and use materials in new ways.

Windows of Opportunity

New brain research indicates that there are important "windows of opportunity" that exist during the early years. These are considered the "prime" times for these areas to be developed. Experts have identified several areas that are particularly critical during the early years these include: language, logical thinking, music, vision, and emotion. Appropriate and interesting experiences, during the early years, in these specific areas can have a positive impact on the child's current development as well brain connections that will last a lifetime.

Visual Environment

During the first eight years, children are developing their visual acuity. Their perceptions of objects, movement, and print are expanded as they have opportunities for experiencing interesting visual images. Changes and variations of design intrigue children and cause them to visually attend to the unusual. The young child's environment that includes interesting visual aspects draws them to examine a painting on the wall or recognize a drawing that they have completed. Displays and panels provide visually interesting content to examine as children move about in the classroom space. In the past, many early childhood classrooms were so filled with commercial decorations, materials and, "stuff" that young children were visually overwhelmed. Today, we are working to have less clutter and a more organized display of materials and work, so young children can visually attend to and enjoy the important features of the environment.

Auditory Environment

Music and sound patterns stimulate several portions of the young child's brain. A variety of music and instruments can expand the sound world of young children, while developing musical enjoyment. Singing in circle time and during transitions encourages the children to discriminate sounds and identify familiar patterns. Making music with simple rhythm instruments provides opportunities for children to connect the object with the sound that it produces and to control the production. Recordings of vocals, instrumentals, and folk instruments provide another listening experience that expands the auditory

environment for young children. Providing a special area for group participation, as well as a center where sounds can be explored individually, can add to the auditory possibilities of the classroom.

Integrated Environment

Young children make many connections when they participate in meaningful activities. Integrated activities that connect several types of learning are particularly effective for preschool children. These experiences provide stimulation for several portions of the brain and make additional connections that extend learning. Some of the experiences that are particularly powerful for integrated learning and building connections are learning centers, thematic episodes, and projects. To support integrated learning, materials must be readily accessible to the play areas and stored so that they can be selected and included in the play. To encourage the continuation of projects, there must be places to carefully store objects while the work is in progress.

Emotional Environment

It has been suggested that the emotions of children are strongly influenced by the responsiveness of the caregiver during the first years of life. If the child's joy is reflected by the caregiver and the emotion is reciprocated, the child's security is strengthened. If the child's emotion is interpreted as annoying by the caregiver, the circuits become confused. A caring and responsive caregiver provides a positive climate for young children that will impact not only emotional security but also many aspects of cognitive development. Children who feel secure and supported will experiment, try new things, and express their ideas.

The appropriate emotional environment also respects young children, while understanding individual differences. This means that each child has a place to collect "valuable" things - their pictures and work are displayed in the classroom. There is a place where the child can retreat when things get too busy, or when he becomes tired.

Independent Learners

An independent learner is able to make personal

choices and carry out an appropriate plan of action. Beginning in infancy and toddlerhood and continuing throughout childhood, there is the growing need to become an independent person. Children want to do things for themselves and in their own way. Preschoolers become increasingly competent in making choices, creating a plan, and following through with a project or experience. If children's ideas are valued and their interest followed they will work on projects for long periods of time. This process is supported in an environment where children are able to revisit and reflect on their plans, while using their knowledge in ways that are meaningful for them.

An effective environment is designed so even the youngest of children can become independent. There are many opportunities for them to be successful as they work to do things for themselves. They are not dependent on the teacher and constantly asking for every material they need. An orderly display of accessible materials grouped together will help children understand that they are capable of making decisions. The environment will communicate to them, "you can make the selection, you have good ideas, and you can carry out the plan for yourself."

Influence of Environment on Children's Behaviors
The environment in which young children live tells them how to act and respond. A large open space in the center of the classroom clearly invites young children to run across the area. If few materials are available to use, children will create interesting happenings, including conflict. If the procedures for using learning centers are not predictable and easily

understood, the children will wander in and out of the areas with little involvement in play.

The arrangement and materials in the environment will determine the areas where children focus their work. It will also influence the number of conflicts that occur or the way the group works together. If the materials are hard plastic, the children are invited to be rough with the objects with little concern for their treatment. If a beautiful flower arrangement is on the table, they will learn to visually examine the flowers and gently handle the delicate blooms. Children learn to be respectful of their environment if they have opportunities to care for beautiful objects and materials.

Conclusion

Young children respond differently, based on the design of the environment in which they live. An effectively designed classroom has the potential for positively influencing all areas of children's development: physical, social /emotional, and cognitive. Language and learning are nurtured in an environment that values and plans appropriate opportunities. The environment can support the development of behaviors that are valued in our society, such as cooperation and persistence. An aesthetically pleasing space can develop a child's appreciation for the beautiful world around them. Most importantly, quality environment can provide a home like setting that "feels" like a good place to be.